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ABSTRACT

Most research in feedback has not found significant differences in error correcting approaches for L2 writing. This paper reviews research on error correction approaches used by second language instructors and reports on a survey of 50 French and American instructors of English as a Second Language (ESL). Although research over the last 35 years suggested that no one particular approach to error correction has made a significant difference on students' ESL acquisition process, some textbooks for the training of ESL teachers continue to advocate one method over another. A comparison of error correction techniques among French and American ESL teachers found that no one approach was shared by the majority of Americans: 38 percent reported using circling, 33 percent symbols, and 24 percent editing, and 5 percent summary techniques. Nearly three-quarters of the French ESL teachers reported using symbols, while circling and editing accounted for 18 and 11 percent of the respondents, respectively. No French ESL teacher used summary methods. All of the American instructors claimed to ask their students to rewrite their work, whereas 22 percent of the French instructors did not. Other results and their implications are discussed. Contains 31 references. (MDM)

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Feedback in L2 Writing

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The following paper was presented at the 1994 Annual Conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics which was held in Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

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INTRODUCTION

Most research in feedback has not found significant differences in error correcting approaches for L2 writing. In this paper I will review research on feedback that spans the past thirty-five years. Though most of this research has found that no approach seems to make a significant difference in the student's acquisition process, some textbooks for the training of foreign language teachers continue to advocate for one method over another.

I am currently carrying out a long term project at Montclair State where different forms of feedback are being applied to higher-intermediate level ESL students. To gain a better understanding of the forms of error correction currently in use, I decided to survey fifty instructors of English to speakers of other languages. In the second part of this paper I will discuss their responses to questions concerning feedback preferences.

TERMS: ERRORS AND FEEDBACK

Before reviewing the research in this area, it is necessary to define two terms: errors and feedback. Our understanding of the word *error* itself can explain much of the disagreement that is to be found regarding its treatment. From a behaviorist viewpoint, errors were seen as "bad habits" which needed to be overcome through learning. For contrastive analysis, the counter part of bad habits was negative transfer. When elements from the student's L1 differed greatly with structures in the L2, the possibility of interference was seen as great (Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991, p. 53-55).

With the Chomskyian inspired view of acquisition as rule driven, errors came to be seen as indicators of elements not yet fully acquired or plain lapses in performance. Put simply, errors presented a failure in linguistic competence (Svartvik 1973). For the L2 student, errors most often represented an inadequate knowledge of rules. With the study of interlanguage, errors came to be interpreted as dialectal and not erroneous. In this continuum moving from the L1 to the target language, a student's evolving interlanguage seemed to follow a built-in syllabus that, in the absence of fossilization, would lead to something resembling the L2 without intervention (Corder 1978, pp. 72-77).

In the seventies, Burt & Kiparsky (1974) distinguished global errors from local errors. Global errors were those that showed up frequently in student production where as local errors were one time occurrences. With more communicative views of language acquisition, errors were recognized as listener defined (Esmondson 1993). Only those elements that caused confusion on the part of the listener warranted correction.

The treatment of errors or the teacher response to errors is more commonly

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referred to now as *feedback*. Kulhavy in 1977 defined feedback as "any of the numerous procedures that are used to tell a learner if an instructional response is right or wrong" (p. 211). Levels of intensity of correction vary from meticulous corrections to no corrections at all. In between these two extremes one finds corrections sensitive to particular pedagogical criteria and corrections with successful communication in mind.

RESEARCH EXPERIMENTS

With such a wide spectrum of feedback forms, how does the instructor decide which to use? Certainly one approach must be more affective than another. A number of experiments have been carried out on L1, L2, and foreign language students. Some of the earliest experiments on feedback were carried out on L1 students. Page in 1958 working with a large number of secondary students claimed that those who received comments on their papers along with their score improved at a greater rate than those with just a grade and no comment. However it should be noted that there were some flaws in this experimental design. Another experiment involving L1 students was published in 1967 by Stiff. He compared the use of symbols by the errors and comments at the end of essays to meticulous corrections. A significant difference was not discovered.

Several experiments have been carried out with the help of ESL or EFL students. Hendrickson (1981) carried out research to determine if local errors should be ignored by instructors. Correcting all local and global errors in one group and global only in the other, Hendrickson found no significance in between the two parties. Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) compared four types of feedback. They claimed that more direct forms of corrective treatment do not improve student writing at a rate greater than that of other methods. Several other experiments have up held this claim. In carrying out such an experiment on 72 students at Montclair State, I also found no significant difference between those who received teacher editing, indications of errors, and no comment feedback (Ihde 1993).

Similarly in 1984, Semke using four forms of feedback reported little significance between approaches. However she reported a finding that has not appeared in other experiments. According to Semke, one form of error correction, rewrites, may have a negative effect on student performance. Lalande's findings (1982) have also not been duplicated; student error codes were significantly more effective than traditional teacher corrections. Both Semke and Lalande were working with English speakers learning German.

SURVEY

Last summer while at Trinity College Dublin I had the opportunity to elicit data from about forty French EFL teachers who were attending a summer course at the university. I decided to ask them which error corrective approach they used most often and why? Twenty-eight of these teachers responded. I later put the same questionnaire on the TESL-L list. I received twenty-two responses of which twenty-one were from Americans.

Before comparing responses received from French and American English

teachers, let us become clear on what the different approaches entail. Perhaps the most meticulous of approaches is what Robb, Ross, and Shortreed called "correction" (1986, p. 86) and Stiff termed "marginal feedback" (1967, pp. 67-68). With this approach the instructor is actually editing lexical, syntactic, and stylistic errors and for this reason I have chosen to call it **editing** in this paper. Rewrites for this method are, at best, exercises in copying. Advocates for this approach such as Lalande (1982, p. 140) and others (see Omaggio 1986, p. 50) see it as the only way for obtaining near-native fluency.

The use of corrective **symbols** is perhaps one of the more popular approaches. Labeled "symbolic code" by Semke (1984, p. 196), "coded" feedback by Robb, Ross, & Shortreed (1986), and "direct correction treatment" by Hendrickson (1980, p. 218), this method identifies the place and type of error while not actually providing the correct usage. "Terminal" feedback as used by Stiff (1967, pp. 69-71) refers to an approach in which both symbols and comments at the end of the essay are used.

On the other hand, marking the place of the error without identifying the type has been termed "uncoded" feedback by Robb, Ross, & Shortreed and "indirect error treatment" by Hendrickson. The assumption here is that students will be able to figure the type of error committed. This approach will be referred to as **circling** here. A less explicit version of this called "marginal feedback" (not to be confused with Stiff's use of the term) noted in the margin the number of errors contained in each line.

More communicative approaches in responding to written errors stress understanding. If the error causes confusion (see Burt 1975 and Semke 1984) or intolerance of any kind (see Ensz 1982 and Guntermann 1978) on the part of the reader, then its occurrence must be addressed. This is often done by writing the student a note at the end of the essay. This note could be in response to the subject of discussion as well as noting some errors. I will term this as **summary**.

RESULTS

When comparing use of feedback types between my French and American informants, clear differences could be seen. No one approach was shared by a majority of Americans. Thirty-eight percent of the American sample claimed to make use of circling, thirty-three percent maintained that they used symbols, and twenty-four and five percent claimed to use editing and summary techniques respectively.

In contrast to this, nearly three-quarters of the French sample made use of one method alone, symbols. Circling and editing accounted for only eighteen and eleven percent of the respondents. No French participant claimed to employ summary methods. The French EFL teachers supported their choice of symbols as the preferred approach by claiming that it caused students to become more aware of the different types of errors being committed. Many also claimed that symbols made students think for themselves and aid in developing self correction skills.

A less direct approach than this, circling, was used by five out of twenty-eight of the French instructors and eight out of twenty-one of the American instructors. American teachers in defending their approach maintained that responsibility needs to be placed on the student for identifying the errors. Some instructors stated that it is

often unclear what the cause of the error is. This approach permits the student to improve on what they originally wanted to say and not what the instructor perceived them as wanting to say and not what the instructor perceived them as wanting to say. Lastly one professor claimed that if the element is really a mistake and not an error, the student is well capable of correcting it without teacher intervention.

The French instructors who made use of circling wanted their students to discover what was wrong with their errors. This, one of the teachers maintained, is the job of a student and not the professor. Another respondent claimed that classifying each type of error with symbols would be too time consuming, especially seeing that the most common errors are regularly reviewed in class.

None of the participants in the survey, American or French, claimed not to make any corrections on students' essays. In that aspect all agreed that some form of teacher error correction was necessary. As concerned the use of instructors editing students' papers, nearly a quarter of the Americans used this approach whereas only about eleven percent of the French sample used such practices. One French EFL teacher stated that this method provided personalized help for students and it allowed them to reflect on their errors outside of the classroom as well.

As stated above a larger percentage of American ESL instructors use full editing. Though most did this by correcting the students' papers, one respondent made use of a tape recorder to inform students of their errors. The reasons for using editing were varied. One instructor claimed his students deserved such correction after all the hard work they put in on writing their essays. Another stated that students were sometimes confused by symbols and unable to correct the errors when they did understand the symbol.

Participants were also asked about their use of rewrites and the frequency of them. Results showed that whereas all American informants claimed to ask their students to rewrite their work, twenty-two percent of the French sample did not. The frequency at which instructors did request rewrites varied. Fifty-seven percent of the American ESL teachers maintained that they always had students work on essays in several drafts. Twenty-nine and fourteen percent of the same sample claimed "most of the time" and "sometimes" respectively. Though three of the French respondents did not mark frequency, the only category to register over eleven percent was "sometimes" which reached forty-six percent.

One reason for the large number of "always" responses in the American sample may be due to the effects of process writing (see White & Arndt 1991). Part of this approach is based on the concept of several drafts. One American respondent made an interesting comment that may explain the reason for more than half the Americans choosing "always" and nearly half of the French sample choosing "sometimes." She claimed that "always" was a viable option because her students did their work on word-processors.

Due to the small sample sizes and the lack of random selection of participants, one could question the generalization of the findings here. However as a preliminary study, one can conclude that three points stand out. First, the instructors in the sample agree that some form of correction is necessary. Secondly, the use of summary methods,

which were identified above as possibly being communicative in nature, are not used by most teachers in the sample. Lastly, whereas most instructors disagree on the frequency of rewrites, a small number of instructors (all of whom were French) do not use rewrites at all.

These data validate the use of certain error corrective treatment forms for the long term project which I spoke of at the beginning of this paper. Symbols have been applied in correcting essays of the control group. This seems to be one of the commonly used methods of correction as can be seen in the above data. The experimental group in the long term experiment have been receiving summaries at the end of their essays. The title experimental is supported due to the above data which clearly shows the infrequency with which teachers use this approach.

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